

# GUILD GALLERY



LUDMILLA BALKIS

STASIS



ROMAN AND WILLIAMS GUILD GALLERY  
THREE TWO ONE CANAL ST, NEW YORK, NY 10013  
646•693•0279

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## LUDMILLA BALKIS STASIS

JUN 9, 2023 - JUL 22, 2023

Guild Gallery is pleased to present the first solo U.S. exhibition of Ludmilla Balkis, a French artist known for her work in ceramics. Trained as a fashion designer, Balkis was an integral part of Céline’s creative team under Phoebe Philo, where she worked alongside Philo in London for many years before turning to ceramics. The development of her ceramic practice coincided with a move to the French Basque Country, where she sought out a more direct connection to the surrounding landscape.

Rooted in her relationship to nature, Balkis’ vessels present an evolving dialogue between organic elements and clay. With this exhibition, Balkis seeks to capture stasis—a state of static balance in movement—in her sculptures. Combining Japanese firing techniques with her command of clothing design, Balkis has defined her own language in ceramics. Opening on June 9, *Stasis* will spotlight more than 20 of Balkis’ new ceramics, revealing the artist’s unequivocal devotion to sensuality in minimalism and her constant pursuit of equilibrium, which transcends her artworks. In conjunction with her exhibition at Guild Gallery, Balkis’ work will be featured in “A Summer Arrangement: Object & Thing at Long House” in East Hampton from May 27 – September 3, 2023.

Balkis approaches ceramics much like she would a piece of fabric. She begins each piece by handbuilding around the emptiness, creating a dialogue with the clay that seeks to fill the void. It is from this exchange and tension that her minimal forms begin to take shape, manifesting into delicate sculptures and vessels that are in static balance and movement much like her natural surroundings—the ancient Pyrenees mountains sculpted by the steadfast hand of time, the trees with their fluid forms, shaped by wind, rain, and light—each forms of perpetual movement. Working with a range of naturally colored clay, Balkis prefers to leave it in its raw, untouched state.

To further engage in a dialogue with the soil that surrounds her, Balkis uses geological materials that she forages on her daily walks, augmenting the surfaces of her clay pieces with tree ash, stones, sticks, and minerals. As a final step, Balkis often fires her ceramics in a wood kiln, which exposes each piece to flames, smoke, glowing coal and ash, producing a range of natural finishes. An essential part of Balkis’ practice is her trust in nature’s process and the act of letting go of the physical piece once a work is fired. As she states: “It keeps you humble that the material is not yours anymore, it’s nature’s work.” The works presented in this exhibition reflect the landscape of Balkis’ subconscious mind and the existential minimalism of nature.



LUDMILLA BALKIS IN HER STUDIO IN  
AHAXE-ALCIETTE-AHAXE-ALCIETTE-BASCASSAN, FRANCE.  
PHOTO CREDIT: MARION BENOIT

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LEFT: LUDMILLA BALKIS, OREKO, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH WOOD ASH , 23.5"H X 15.75"W X 11"D  
CENTER: LUDMILLA BALKIS, HODEI, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE, 20.5"H X 27.5"W X 23.25"D  
RIGHT: LUDMILLA BALKIS, METAMORPHOSIS, 2023, STONEWARE, IRON STAIN, CLAY AND WOOD ASH SLIP, 27.5"H X 8"W X 13.75"D

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

LUDMILLA BALKIS  
B. 1981 DOMONT, FRANCE

Ludmilla Balkis is a ceramicist who has exhibited her work in galleries across Europe, including Paris, Biarritz, and Berlin. Balkis' work was also featured in a group show in the Oiasso Museoa, an archeological museum in Irun, Spain. Balkis studied fashion and art history in Paris where she discovered her desire to redefine the relationship with the body in society. Before turning to ceramics, Balkis was a fashion designer for many years and worked at Céline in London with Phoebe Philo.

Continuing her search for a profound connection to the fundamentals, Balkis was drawn to the more grounded reality of ceramics, and she began learning with Freya Bramble Carter in 2014 in London. Initially, she drew inspiration from pioneering ceramicists such as Lucy Rie, Hans Copper and Jennifer Lee's distinctive approaches. Returning to France in 2017, she was introduced to the Japanese approach to clay. Today, Balkis is based in the Ahaxe-Alciette-Bascassan, France—a place of raw, natural splendor. More than ever, soil and a contact with the earth and nature are at the heart of Balkis' endeavor, and her voluntary search for imperfection and unequivocal devotion to minimalism remain central to her practice.



BALKIS IN HER STUDIO IN  
AHAXE-ALCIETTE-BASCASSAN, FRANCE

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BALKIS IN HER STUDIO IN AHAXE-ALCIETTE-BASCASSAN, FRANCE



BALKIS FORMING THE EDGES OF THE STONWARE



BALKIS HAND BUILDING HER SCULPTURES IN HER STUDIO



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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### EXHIBITIONS

2021 AUGUST	A MANO STUDIO	BIARRITZ, FRANCE
2021 JANUARY	GALERIE SORS PARIS	PARIS, FRANCE
2020 DECEMBER	RYOKO BERLIN	BERLIN, GERMANY
2020 OCTOBER	1000 VASES GALERIE JOSEPH	PARIS, FRANCE
2019 NOVEMBER	A MANO STUDIO "LE PETIT COUVERT"	BIARRITZ, FRANCE
2017 JUNE	SOMETIMES STUDIO "MAINS À L'OEUVRE"	PARIS, FRANCE
	CENTRE CULTUREL LA MONTGOLFIÈRE	VAUCRESSON, FRANCE





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LEFT: LUDMILLA BALKIS, ITZALA, 2023, RED SANDED STONEWARE WITH COBALT OXIDE, 17.75"H X 10.5"W X 11.75"D  
RIGHT: LUDMILLA BALKIS, ARCHAIC, 2023, RED SANDED STONEWARE WITH WOOD ASH AND PORCELAIN SLIP, 20.25"H X 7.25"W X 6.75"D

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BALKIS PREPARING ONE OF HER WORKS FOR THE KILN AT THE WORKSHOP IN AHAXE-ALCIETTE-BASCASSAN, FRANCE



BALKIS GLAZING THE EDGES OF ON THE HEAVENS



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BALKIS PREPARING ONE OF HER WORKS FOR THE KILN AT THE WORKSHOP IN AHAXE-ALCIETTE-BASCASSAN, FRANCE



LUDMILLA BALKIS, ILARGIA, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH WHITE MATTE GLAZE AND BLACK GLAZE PARTIALLY APPLIED TO INTERIOR, 15"H X 18"W X 16"D



DETAIL, LUDMILLA BALKIS, ILARGIA, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH WHITE MATTE GLAZE AND BLACK GLAZE PARTIALLY APPLIED TO INTERIOR, 15"H X 18"W X 16"D



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LUDMILLA BALKIS, HODEI, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE,  
20.5"H X 27.5"W X 23.25"D



DETAIL, LUDMILLA BALKIS, HODEI, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE,  
20.5"H X 27.5"W X 23.25"D



DETAIL, LUDMILLA BALKIS, OREKO, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH  
WOOD ASH, 23.5"H X 15.75"W X 11"D



LUDMILLA BALKIS, OREKO, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH WOOD  
ASH, 23.5"H X 15.75"W X 11"D





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LUDMILLA BALKIS, BLACK & WHITE DIPTYQUE, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE & BLACK SANDED STONEWARE, 19.75"H X 7"W X 3.5"D, 20"H X 9.75"W X 6"D

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LUDMILLA BALKIS, OLATUA, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH WOOD ASH SLIP, 21.25"H X 15"W X 17.25"D



DETAIL, LUDMILLA BALKIS, OLATUA, 2023, WHITE SANDED STONEWARE WITH WOOD ASH SLIP, 21.25"H X 15"W X 17.25"D



DETAIL, LUDMILLA BALKIS, RIFT, 2023, RED SANDED STONEWARE, 19.25"H X 10.25"W X 8"D



LUDMILLA BALKIS, RIFT, 2023, RED SANDED STONEWARE, 19.25"H X 10.25"W X 8"D







BALKIS TRANSMITS THE INTIMACY SHE FINDS IN NATURE THROUGH STRUCTURE, USING HER HANDS, STICKS, STONE, AND CLAY



BALKIS ON A WALK THROUGH THE FOREST, WHICH SHE DESCRIBES AS WILD WITH BOTH STILLNESS AND MOVEMENT



THE STUDIO IN AHAXE-ALCIETTE-BASCASSAN, FRANCE WHERE BALKIS BEGAN HER WORK ON "STASIS"



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LUDMILLA BALKIS, HUTSA, 2023, RED SANDED STONEWARE WITH WOOD ASH, 9"H X 17.25"W X 17.25"D

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## INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST LUDMILLA BALKIS

BY  
MACKENZIE WAGONER

The sky is fading in Ahaxe-Alciette-Bascassan, France, where Ludmilla Balkis is turning on the lights in the stonecrafted studio connected to her house. Balkis walks past the shelves of hushed ceramics that she first began creating nine years ago, illuminating their swirling movement and gentle folds with every switch she clicks. “I’m really good at working at night,” she says, taking a seat. Following her daily walks through the surrounding mountains, forest, and Atlantic coastline, on which she keeps her eyes keenly peeled for natural sculpting tools and raw materials including slab and sand, Balkis returns to her studio to sit in silence and transmit the profound intimacy with the natural world through her hands, sticks, rocks, clay, and fire. The practice requires an addictive patience paired with skills honed in her past life.

Balkis has been defining sumptuous minimalism for decades. The former designer for Phoebe Philo’s Céline turned to sculpture after the birth of her first son, looking for a creative outlet outside of fashion’s frenetic thrum. Though separate worlds, one medium informed the other. Studying alongside masters in Japan and Korea, she learned to manipulate clay like fabric, cutting, twisting, folding, and extracting from it a balance of unbelievable delicacy and unquestionable strength. This tension of “balance in movement” defines the title of her show, *STASIS*, comprised of more than 20 pieces hand built occasionally in two-day bursts and often in two-week stretches of negotiations with time and her surrounding elements. Most are left unglazed, finished instead by the texture of pressed bark, the bow of a found twig, a spray of wood ash, or the lingering record of a flame’s lick. Balkis joined me for a conversation on the vitality of rooting into nature, how to embody timelessness, and the art of letting go.

MACKENZIE WAGONER: Tell me about how the work in *Stasis* began.

LUDMILLA BALKIS: I made the work last year while finding this equilibrium, which I had never had in my entire life. For me, this was the first group of sculptures that I have made in a way that would allow my mind to settle. The balance is not just balance in my pieces, it’s the whole balance in my life, and in the process of the pieces. The balance we can find when they go from softness to stillness, from stillness to movement. All the pieces are almost talking with one another as a landscape of my subconscious mind, let’s say.

MW: You’ve been making sculptures for nine years, but you spent a lifetime working in fabric. Does the skill set carry over?

LB: I studied a Korean technique of ceramics, where you tend to take a piece of clay and throw it several times until it’s so light that it creates a kind of fluidity, almost like a fabric. I have different techniques, but this is where I tend to work. I do follow lots of masters, and they taught me so much, but I will always end up working in the way I worked with fabric. So this is interesting—the way I work is very different from everyone.

MW: What about your aesthetic—has that shifted?

LB: I wouldn’t have chosen any other brand [than Céline] because I like that idea of minimizing. Learning minimalism with Japanese masters was important to me because it goes to that point, but it also embraces imperfection—the balance between perfect and imperfect. In that way, it’s very close to nature—it’s the equilibrium. It’s finding this exact tiptoeing around something that makes it timeless to me. When I would make clothes, the idea was comfort and timelessness—something that I would wear until I’m 90 years old. This is also my idea of an object.



BALKIS PREPARING A PIECE FOR FIRING AT THE WORKSHOP  
PHOTO CREDIT: MARION BENOIT

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MW: Simplicity is often the hardest thing to do well. What is your approach?

LB: I tend to take off what's unnecessary. At Céline, some clothes were very difficult to build, but they had to look very simple and very pure. This is also my approach to clay. It has to look very light and almost like it would fade into any environment, whether it's inside the house or in the landscape. This is why my daily walks are important. The approach of minimalism is important because the more minimal it is, the easier it can stand anywhere—not only in a museum or in a gallery. They have to be timeless, and they have to fade in a beautiful way, like a tree or a rock you might pass and not look at.

MW: Your palette is very tight—what does that allow you to do?

LB: For me it's to reduce the information, so the pieces stay quiet and focused on shape and movement. I mainly like to leave the clay raw to let it speak by itself. Sometimes I use slab from my walks, which has a lot of iron for a reddish finish that I often mix with wood ash, made from wood that I pick up on my walks and then burn to create ash. I rub the ash on the final sculpture when it's still wet and let it be. Or I mix the ash with slab, which creates another color. The final finish really looks like a rock. Sometimes I add some rocks, or some thick rock-like sand. And when I use a glaze, I stay simple: matte white and black. Black, white, and earth colors, like Céline. The shapes take so much space, I have to narrow the choice of color to bring back the essential: shape and movement.

**“I NEED TO EXPRESS [NATURE]  
IN MY WORK, NOT BY  
MIMICKING [IT], BUT BY  
ACCEPTING ITS CHAOS.”**

MW: Since moving to the Basque region of France, you walk every day. How does that impact your work?

LB: Living here is not being a tourist who just enjoys nature, but rooting in like a tree. Daily walks in the mountains, forest, or at the sea are my kind of healing meditation. In the pace of nature, I could understand more what it was to integrate time. Something would emerge through silence and observation. The landscape is wild with movement and stillness. It can be chaotic at times. It's strong, yet very delicate and wind shaped. The wind is a very present part of the landscape—it has shaped trees and rocks. That is reflected in my work, which looks strong yet fragile, because the edges are super thin almost like lace that could be easily broken.

MW: You also work with materials you find on your walk. What do you look for?

LB: When we moved to Basque country, my approach to work really started to shift because I began to work with more textures. It was interesting to have this relationship with nature. On my walks I might pick up sand, slab, bark, sticks, and stones to use once I've finished [forming] a sculpture. I like to deform the shapes or create textures with the pieces I've found. So it's an evolving dialogue until the end of the piece between me, the elements, the clay, and what I found around me. This is the way I work—it's very instinctive.

MW: How do you cement movement into your work?

LB: In Anima, On the Heavens, Haize, Openness, and Hodei, I created a round base for a fixed stillness, then created openness in movement for the opposite at the top, adding a rim almost like lace to show the delicacy of the finishing. I've made them with glaze, without glaze, with texture, without texture. Each sculpture is different depending on where it is and depending on the light. For me, they're the center of the show. In other pieces, like White Dyptich, I turn a tool to slash the piece to keep the movement—the gesture—on it. The gesture is an important focus of the piece.

MW: What kind of role does your choice of kiln play?

LB: I use an electric kiln and a Japanese wood kiln, which takes six days and six nights. The fire in the anagama creates completely different colors and the flames create movement again in the final work. It makes you humble because you feel like the material is not yours anymore. Nature decides where the work goes. It's letting go. I feel deep inside me that the relationship between nature and my work is vitally important. I need to express that in my work, not by mimicking nature, but by accepting its chaos. It's very Nietzschean, who would say: “Nature is chaos.” You have to accept that you're part of it, and through chaos, you can create something really more beautiful.



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## ABOUT GUILD GALLERY

Located on Canal Street, the vibrant, propulsive stretch of New York City's rising art scene, Guild Gallery celebrates the making of art objects by contemporary masters, drawing upon the millennia-long history of the decorative arts.

Guild Gallery is the natural extension of Roman and Williams Guild, on the corner of Howard and Mercer Streets. When we opened the doors of the Guild it was the realization of a decades-long dream: to create a living organism of people, objects and furnishings—an eclectic world, a modern-day guild of the senses.

We designed the Guild as a place to showcase the furniture that we make alongside the work of artisans we most admire for their skill and dedication to technique. We wanted to emphasize the everyday functionality of remarkably formed items and the significance of living with very beautiful things while valuing the utility of expert crafted pieces.

Guild Gallery is the next stage of evolution in this dialogue. We build on our commitment to help people appreciate the artistry as we celebrate individual makers. While the Guild celebrates a beauty that derives from function, the Gallery focuses purely on form. Whereas the Guild is all about an eclectic mix, the Gallery will spotlight the object, artist, and process.

We want to introduce you to artists who are working today, so that you can follow their trajectories and understand their work as an ongoing, organic narrative. We represent a group of ten remarkable artists, makers of extraordinary art objects, furniture—sculptors and other creators whose medium might be ceramic, glass or wood.

The Guild was founded on the principle that art and craft are not mutually exclusive entities. The contemporary works that we show at the Gallery experiment with line, form, and material, fusing the ancient and the modern through traditional techniques and references to a millennia-old lineage. These are living pieces, made by living artists.

They are living pieces, not just because you can—should—live with them, but also because they are made with materials that feel alive, like wood from trees or gloriously malleable clay. This is a guiding principle of everything we do in our own design practice and, by extension, at Guild Gallery.

These are pieces that are meant to be communed with, in our homes. So while key pieces by an individual artist are displayed at the Canal Street Guild Gallery to be appreciated as works of art in their own right, others will be seen at the Guild on Howard and Mercer, just a stone's throw away, interacting with other objects and furnishings, as it might in a home. Thus we hope to foster connoisseurship and demonstrate how they might be lived with.

The Gallery is a venue designed to support the rigor and discipline of the artists as they fashion their materials, to honor the human scale of their works. To that end, we designed the wooden pedestals on which we display the works; the Gallery emphasizes warmth, purity and focus. We invite you to explore Guild Gallery, to ponder the power of exchange across civilizations, countries and techniques. And investigate these objects that contain profound stories about nature, culture, craft and art.

— *ROBIN STANDEFER and STEPHEN ALESCH*

